

Dear Neighbor

A Play by Jane F. Morrissey, SSJ

In celebration of the upcoming 375th anniversary of the Sisters of St. Joseph, "Dear Neighbor" tells the stories of five women who helped shape the SSJ community.

Monday,
March 18, 2024

4:00 p.m.

Veritas Auditorium
Elms College
291 Springfield Street
Chicopee, MA 01013



Maxim 55:
"When you work for
the neighbor, do it with
a very unselfish love
which expects no
reward for its services,
and aims at nothing
other than helping him
or her and being at the
same time pleasing
to God."

CAST

Directed by Elizabeth Gourde, Elms College Class of 2023

Narrated by Austin Porter, Friend of Elms College

Sister Jeanne Burdier played by Malina Woodbury, Elms College Class of 2026

Mother St. John Fontbonne played by Dr. Jasmine Hall, Elms College Faculty

Mother Mary Cecilia Bowen played by Isamar Perez, Elms College Class of 2026

Sister Mary Dooley played by Jane Morrissey, SSJ

Sister Patricia McDonnell played by Olivia LeBlanc, Elms College Class of 2026

Dear Neighbor

The curtain opens on a stage that holds a podium and a simple table with a wooden chair. A black book is on the table. A microphone is positioned in the center where the speakers' voices can be picked up from the podium or the desk.

There are photos in the background that relate to the stories the speakers will tell. The narrator enters and goes to the podium. She is wearing black.

She speaks.

Conceived of God's embrace of Le Puy en Velay, the Sisters of St. Joseph have spent nearly 375 years turning the world upside down by love.

Founded in the hope that one day they would be known as the Congregation of the Great Love of God, the Sisters have known from the start that, as the Beloved Disciple wrote, there is no way to love the God they cannot see, but by loving the dear neighbor whom they do see, especially the poor.

Their names are countless. They are French, Irish, Indian, African, Latin. Their stories are often hidden.

I cannot tell everything so today I will introduce you to five Sisters: Jeanne Burdier, Jeanne Fontbonne, Ellen Bowen, Mary Dooley, and Patricia McDonnell. They will tell something of their own stories, a sampling from four centuries of Community history.

The Sisters of St. Joseph were founded in the 17th century, a terrible century in France. Approximately 90 percent of its citizens lived in small towns or villages or were dispersed in the rural countryside, in places like Le Puy. Because increasingly lands were held by the wealthy elite, the rest of the population, for whom agriculture was their mainstay, became more and more vulnerable to natural disaster, disease, and deprivation.

"Europe had entered into a 'little ice age' when average temperatures fell, shortening the growing season, reducing harvests, and causing famines. Malnutrition and starvation brought heavy mortality and a deeper and more widespread poverty.

France had four deadly famines between 1630 and 1694 and several others almost as severe.

The people endured almost continuous warfare —international wars, civil wars, and a number of peasant and lower-class uprisings.

These brought widespread devastation and destitution and inflicted the dreaded passage and/or billeting of soldiers upon peasants and townspeople. Periodic outbreaks of the plague increased.

As in any age or place where misery prevails, children were the most vulnerable. In the *Couche*, an orphanage in Paris, some “were sold at eight *sols* apiece to beggars who broke their arms and legs so that people would be inclined to give them alms, and then (they) let them die of hunger.” (Rapley, *Devotes*, 79, as quoted in *SL*, 16-17)

Is it any wonder that at that very time God would issue in the hearts of women a call? That call defied centuries-old civil and canonical strictures and broke through the cloistered walls of religious life. It enabled women to create a design, as old as the Gospel and as new as the dreams of some 70 founders of religious congregations established in France between 1650 and 1720 (*SL*, 20), including the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Who but women would respond to such widespread desperation and turn the world upside down with love?

The narrator exits.

ACT 1

*Sister Jeanne Burdier enters. She is wearing black.
She walks to the podium or sits at the table. Before her is the small black book.*

She speaks.

It is the 17th century. The year is 1694.

Just call me Jeanne.

Jeanne Burdier I was baptized, and little did I dream in the days when I could not write my name that, on a wintry day in 1650, when I put a cross beneath what they told me was my name, I was doing something that would change life completely.

Little did I dream that these 44 years later I would have long administered this *hotel-Dieu* in Vienne, not far from the village in which I was baptized.

Little did I dream that I would have seen this little book through publication (*lifting it up*), that I would tell you my story.

Yet what I tell is true.

We were six dreamers on fire with a dream – Clauda, the three Annas, Francoise, and I. *Filles* they called us; we were *daughters*, daughters of a dream.

It was the dream of *Father Jean-Pierre Medaille*, our inspiration, but our dream too.

Others thought him wild.

His Jesuit brothers thought him wild.

His superior thought him peculiar and wrong... working with women?

He was wild, but with his own indomitable instinct that we women had wildfire inside us.

He was right.

We are wild enough to turn disaster, disease, and death itself upside down with love.

When we six signed a contract that day, December 13, 1650, we changed history.

Five of us marked crosses under what they told us was our name: Clauda Chastal alone could write her name. Together we said "Yes."

We meant it. We could give our lives.

The contract expressed the covenant that weds our hearts to God, whom we cannot see, in these hurt and hungry and helpless people whom we still see daily. We are Sisters of St. Joseph.

The fire was in us, and it flung out over mountain and valley like ribbons and lace from spools in the hands of a Parisian dressmaker.

Ah! The mere mention of ribbons makes me remember the day four years later when the six delegates of the Le Puy City Assembly descended on us. They came in all their frumpy finery, in all their fuss and fury that we women had dared to establish a new foundation in their city without their approval.

They had come to expel us from Le Puy. When they arrived at the hospital, Francoise Eyraud and Marguerite de Saint-Laurans welcomed them lovingly, with that gospel love, “wise as serpents, and guileless as doves.”

Hospitably, the Sisters invited them in. Disarming them totally, they thought to entertain them in the ribbon room.

We were there, as usual, making ribbon, teaching the poor girls and orphans to do it too. Ribbon translated into a language these officials valued; lace-and ribbon-making had long been the industries that attracted people to Le Puy and filled their coffers.

Smiling, those six men left, liberated from their worries that we, and our girls, would tax the city’s treasury. Smiling, we stayed, liberated from civic authority.

The fire of God in us flung out farther and gently, like the ribbon and lace we made together. It lassoed girls and women in these hills and valleys and lured them into our love story.

Wherever we went in the provinces of Forez and Velay, we did much for a little, sometimes for nothing, and so the Bishops blessed us.

We began with orphans, then opened a free school for poor children, then a boarding school for girls from a higher class in order to earn funds to serve those with empty pockets.

We helped families who could not support their children; visited the sick and dying; administered and staffed hospitals, dispensaries of medications for the sick, homes for what they called “fallen women;” a school for “converted” Protestants.

We were responsible for providing relief in poor parishes, teaching in schools for the poor, and setting up and running workshops for making lace and ribbon. Our works were as motley as we are.

The Le Puy City Council came to appreciate us. I memorized the words of their official declaration that we Sisters of St. Joseph were “one of the most useful establishments for the city.” They said that we attended to those under our wing – and I quote – “with a care and regard which is rarely seen elsewhere.”

I first heard about that declaration after coming in 1668 to Vienne, near St. Julien where I was born. Sent here with two companions, I was to take charge of the *hotel-Dieu*. For more than a quarter-century I have.

I hadn’t been here long when, passing through Gap, a neighboring village here in the French Alps, I stopped at its hospital. Seeing conditions there, I got sick. Back at home, the sights and smells at that hospital robbed me of my sleep.

Never one to be deprived of my dreams, I offered to send three Sisters. How quickly the Bishop and town officials said yes!

But in no uncertain terms I told them that our Sisters would not come unless they made some changes. That hospital had everything all mixed up —men with women, sick with healthy. That could not continue.

They decreed necessary changes, and our Sisters went.

Just about four years ago, nightmares I had after first visiting Gap returned with a vengeance.

I received word that on the return march from Italy, the army of Louis XIV was forced by an epidemic to stagger into our hospital.

Every single one of our Sisters caring for them died. I know to this day that they died from the same excessive love that sapped Jesus' life on the cross.

I can still hear *Jean-Pierre Medaille* teaching us the counsel of Saint Paul, to have that mind in us which was in Christ Jesus, who did not deem equality with God something to be clung to, but emptied himself and became of human estate.

What could I do but send Sisters to replace those who had that mind in them even to their death, death by caring?

It's a risky business, turning the world upside down with love.

Gap is only one of the 10 foundations we have established from Vienne. Wherever we go, we Sisters love one another. We share everything: our widows' garb, our money, spiritual books.

Speaking of books, I am reminded that I wanted to tell you about this little one, (*she picks up the book*) our Constitution.

I already told you how strange it is that I, who could not sign my name those 44 years ago, would get involved in publishing.

I could see errors creeping into copies of our Constitution and feared we were losing something of our original spirit.

Where would we ever find time to make copies of our little rule for our new houses? We are not scribes.

So I called together a group of Sisters to compare different versions of this book in which we preserve the teaching of our first days, more than four decades ago.

They formulated an acceptable text, and I asked the archbishop to have the official Constitution printed. He agreed.

Can you imagine how I feel each time I hold in my two hands the first printed copy of the dream, the Constitution of the Sisters of St. Joseph?

Then I know that my world too has been turned upside down by love.

She takes the book with her as she exits. She passes Mother St. John Fontbonne who is entering. They smile and nod and Sister Jeanne hands off the book.

ACT 2

*Mother St. John, also in black, sits at the table. She places the book there.
An unopened letter lies in front of her.
She examines the envelope, opens it slowly and starts reading aloud the return
address: Soeurs de Saint Joseph, Saint Louis, Missouri.*

She reflects in silence for a few moments, then speaks.

My nieces wrote for my 80th birthday. It is now the year 1839. That's a long time to have lived.

Weeks ago I finished my term as Reverend Mother of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Lyon. I keep remembering a story my grandfather used to tell me in his carpentry shop. Long ago he said, a carpenter built a table for his family and they used to gather around it to break bread and tell stories.

One day evil men broke up the table and used the wood to build a gallows on which those declared guilty died. Then a good man rose up. He tore down the gallows and used the wood to build a ship that carried the unwanted and those who loved them across the sea to a new world.

I was baptized Jeanne Fontbonne the very day I was born, March 31, 1759.
As children, my older sister Marie and I came to know the Sisters of St. Joseph. They were our aunts. They were our teachers.
They taught us to read and write.
When we were older and boarding at the Sisters' Academy in Le Puy, they taught us to make ribbon and lace.
All their lessons have come in handy.

Marie and I learned to be Sisters of St. Joseph in Monistrol with our aunt Sister St. Francis as Superior. There I made my vows.
There at age 26 I succeeded her.
She had taught me how to teach.
Now I was to learn if she had taught me how to serve the community well.

In those years Revolution was simmering.
I could see it in the eyes of the poor families of our students and in those who wandered our streets begging, but I did not know its name. I had been Superior four years when mobs stormed the walls of the Bastille.
Paris lay many leagues away, but we felt the rumblings of this Revolution like the aftershocks in Pompeii.

Our church was secularized. Our land was confiscated. Our priests, according to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, were to be paid by the state.
Bought off like so many others, our parish priest, Father Ollier, willingly signed the oath of allegiance to the Civil Constitution.
What did it matter to him that the Pope forbade it?

Into our convents we received priests who refused to sign the oath and so were banned from parish Churches.

They fed us with the Eucharist, and we – “stripped down like the Eucharist,” —as *Jean Pierre Medaille* said we would be – learned to be “content if we had much, or little, or nothing at all.”

Civil authorities, in the state and this new “civil” church, were bewildered as to what they could do with - or better said, without - us active Sisters.

Without qualms, they had closed monasteries and confiscated their lands, but what would be done in hospitals and schools without us? On the other hand, how could they not suppress us?

They engaged in debate. In one case, I’ve heard, they spoke of us Sisters of St. Joseph as “charlatans” who, just because we could read and write, were doing the work of lawyers and pharmacists and doctors, even surgeons.

They determined to treat us like “vermin” whose infested homes had become “the haunt and foul refuge of all the refractory priests.”

By 1793, the Revolution may have been over but the Reign of Terror escalated. Rather than separate ourselves from our faith by taking the “Oath of Liberty-Equality” most of us chose prison. Since our property now belonged to the state, some of us were jailed in what had been our beloved convents.

I was incarcerated for nine months. One Sunday my captors ordered me to work.

I told them in no uncertain terms that, if I chose to live by the laws of the Republic, I would be somewhere else entirely.

In jail I mourned our dear Sisters who went to the guillotine in Le Puy – Marie-Anne Garnier and Jeanne-Marie Aubert.

Some days I had the courage to pray to follow them. Though rumor had our company long worrying how far above our necks the murderous blade was suspended, I must have been unworthy.

She pauses.

The news reached our cells. Robespierre was dead, and we were free.

But where were we free to go?

Our convents and lands had been confiscated.

Some sisters went to their families — I did.

Some went to their convents and found them destroyed or occupied.

Others found their schools in the hands of strangers; fewer found their hospitals run by the state. Although a minority, some Sisters in hospitals had never budged an inch.

To the hospital at Gap, established by one of our first sisters, Jeanne Burdier, Napoleon brought Austrian soldiers, prisoners of war, suffering with typhus.

We cared for them.

In 1801 Napoleon's Concordat made peace with the church, but left power and land in the hands of the state. Religious communities were allowed to exist as long as they were "useful" and "compliant."

What mattered the description, so long as we were free to serve our dear neighbor, especially the poor?

I stayed in Bas with Marie and our parents until the day Napoleon's uncle, Cardinal Fesch, arrived at our door to charge me with returning, and rebuilding and reorganizing the religious life we had known. We women began to do again what we had done before – divide the city into sections and care for those who had no one to care for them.

We remembered *Father Medaille's* advice that, like the Eucharist, we be "totally for others."

We rebuilt and restored and rose up like bread.

We would do all we could to turn this world, turned upside down by Revolution, right-side-up, by loving.

I could tell you many stories about those years, about our Sisters and families and friends, but this letter (*she waves the letter*) reminds me to tell you about Felicite de Duras, the countess of Rochejaquelin.

Three years ago she paid the passage of the Sisters who have written from Missouri. She had read in the Annals of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyon an appeal for missionaries and financial aid from Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis.

She had already financed several of our foundations in France and was intrigued by the prospects of doing something new in what we called the New World.

She extracted a promise of Sisters from me, then wrote to Bishop Rosati. She told him that she knew one of the foundations, "which began in a stable and with only six cents." She assured him, "This establishment prospered, as well as others begun in like manner." She informed him about our new work in prisons, as well as our traditional works with the sick and the poor and the imprisoned and the orphans and the deaf and the students. She also let him know that we made ribbons.

Last time I counted since the Revolution we have 200 new foundations. I took the count after seeing off my nieces, Delphine and Febronie, and four others on the stagecoach that brought them to the steamboat, that brought them across the Atlantic to Louisiana and to the Mississippi River, that brought them finally to *Vide Poche*, "Empty Pocket," right outside St. Louis.

(Again she picks up the envelope, takes out the letter, and begins to read. When she has finished, she puts the letter down. She muses.)

How could I know when my sister Marie and I whispered in our little bed, or when I was imprisoned, or when Cardinal Fesch knocked, that at 80 years of age I would have seen

Sisters of St. Joseph — if ground and crushed like the wheat and grapes of the Eucharist
— giving so much and going so far —to turn the world upside down by love.

*The lights dim. She exits. She passes Mother Mary Cecilia Bowen, who is entering,
carrying an orange in her left hand. They smile and nod and Mother St. John hands off
the book.*

ACT 3

Mother Mary Cecilia sits, dressed in black. She places the orange and the book on the table. She makes the Sign of the Cross silently.

She speaks.

Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive...

It is late August, 1890. Lord, to tell you the truth, I'm not feeling well this morning. I don't mean to seem ungrateful, but even after making two retreats this summer, my spirit is low. I still want to turn the world upside down by loving but it feels more like my insides are turning upside down.

I ask you truly, am I turning the wrong way? Since taking my turn dividing the cities and serving the poor, I've tried so hard to follow your directions. The path has wound like a brown ribbon of roads and railroad tracks from Elizabethtown, New Jersey, where I was born on Our Lady's birthday and baptized Ellen Bowen, to Springfield, Massachusetts, where today they call me Mother Mary Cecilia.

You've been faithful in flagging me on and making me mindful of the one warning sign erected in my mind from childhood: "Don't take no for an answer." I don't... Not even from You sometimes.

If I do, how will we ever manage to turn this stubborn, biased world upside down by love?

I consider sometimes my friends who came to Flushing, New York, that day in 1860 when I and the others made vows. Those friends were both Catholic and Protestant. Friendship recognizes no denomination.

Your people are Your people, however and wherever we pray.

In 1880, seven years after I missed the train to Boston and our first Massachusetts mission, I got sent to Springfield. There I met up with a Bishop who worried about stepping on Protestants' political toes. I already knew we gained nothing by hanging our heads and backing away.

I started to divide the cities of the Pioneer Valley in 1880 on walks with the schoolchildren from St. Patrick's in Chicopee Falls to Holyoke. We'd walk and walk until we'd see a poor shanty, and we'd stop by to see if anyone was sick or hungry. Your dear children knew they could reach into my pocket and pull out oranges and hardboiled eggs and sometimes candy.

No matter when we came back home, we'd find my pockets empty.

Three years later, Bishop O'Reilly requested of dear Mother Teresa Mullin back in Long Island that we become the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Springfield and we did. The

Springfield paper reported the arrival of twelve. We thought of ourselves as Your pioneer apostles.

The newspaper said that education would be our primary work and that we would visit the sick and the friendless, do parish work, teach Sunday school, give lessons in music and needlework. You alone knew what was really in store for us.

When You chose me as Mother Mary Cecelia, I'll bet You knew from the beginning that I was as forthright as Bishop O'Reilly was fearful. He was inclined to accept the restrictions imposed by civil authority on Catholic presence at the poorhouse and the jail and the municipal hospital. Not I. I am a Sister of St. Joseph.

I first brought the novices to the almshouse, and when turned away, turned around and asked all the influential people I knew, and all the influential people the Bishop knew, and all the cloistered religious we both knew to pray and do whatever their principles allowed.

And remember... it was the day after St. Joseph's Day, when the first boy to graduate from Cathedral High School, William Whoriskey, served the first Mass, the Bishop's Mass, at the poorhouse. How many oranges and how much candy and how much love and how much hope we left behind us that day!

Bishop O'Reilly – remember? – was equally certain that Catholics would never get into the jail. So I took a trip to Westfield to the home of that dear Protestant gentleman, Hampden County Commissioner Root. Just to make sure we'd get to the root of the matter, we stopped at Saint Mary's Church *en route*.

You, of course, had been there long before I arrived. When I saw how little the statues of Mary and Joseph were in that new big church, I promised You bigger statues if the Commissioner proved big enough to agree to my plan.

I don't need to tell you the story's happy ending.

You know too how often the Sisters and I go to jail now and how that poor, bored young man awaiting trial bore his way into my heart. He inspired a new plan of contacting anew all those influential people to request just two books from each to build a library for people serving time.

Three-hundred books they have now, and I have a thank-you note in the beautiful script of one Frederick Conroy who assured me that he was thanking me on behalf of "both denominations."

When I heard the story of one Father James McDermott who had to threaten force before they would allow him to administer Extreme Unction to someone dying at the Municipal Hospital, I was prepared for the doorkeeper.

He turned me away only to watch me walk right by and hear me insist that visiting the sick is one of the special works God has assigned us, as I urged my companion to come right along. On the way out, that dour doorkeeper seemed to expect me to say that we'd be back at least once a week.

He seems to like to see us now, and every once in a while, I give him an orange too.

Just seven years ago, we were twelve, and now we are 68, with countless friends and benefactors, and seventeen schools in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Newport, Rhode Island.

Our life may be simple – I remember eating ginger soup for supper – but it's also full of sweet surprises, like the nights that the first- graders slept in our attic as the snow fell and fell and fell.

On the third day, when my mittened hand put the yardstick through the mounds to the ground, the snow was deeper than the yardstick was tall.

But what was I saying this summer morning?...

Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which we have received from Thy bounty through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

And, Lord, though my stomach is turning upside down and I don't feel up to eating this orange, I ask you only for the grace to continue with your help dividing the city and doing my part to turn this world upside down with love.

She exits. She passes Sister Mary Dooley and hands her the book. They smile and nod.

ACT 4

Sister Mary Dooley enters. She is wearing black with something pink—perhaps a scarf. She is singing off-key: “It’s a grand old name.” She places the book before her.

She speaks.

“Mingling Mary,” my sisters tease me, but the mingling comes from deep within, for the longer I live, the truer I know, our God is always mingling.

It is May 1979, and this is Mont Marie.

I’ve been remembering a trip to Le Puy, the birthplace of the Community that taught me in high school and college, and became my very own family, and thanking God for women who oriented me toward “excellence tempered by gentleness, peace and joy.”

I thought today of my dear high school teacher, Sister Elizabeth Michael, who had first turned my world upside down with love, and made me think she was what I wanted to be.

I thought of Sister Antonella, who in my college days, whatever the campus laws, encouraged me to speak to the editor of the Springfield Daily News about better coverage for our College of Our Lady of the Elms.

And when the editor took me out to dinner, and I walked through the college gates long after the prescribed hour, she didn’t censure me like Cinderella’s stepmother or “campus” me, but instead congratulated me.

These Sisters of Saint Joseph seemed to know that we’d never turn the world upside down if we didn’t mingle.

While studying at the Sorbonne, I became aware of Karl Barth’s counsel to Christians that we walk through the world with today’s newspaper in one hand and the Word of God in the other. Paris at the time of the Second Vatican Council taught me that the more I mingled the two, the closer I came to the truth.

Karl Barth’s counsel wasn’t all that different from the plain wisdom of dear Irish-born Sister Alberta. I can still see her in my first mission in North Adams, the night she was pulling the curtain aside to peer out the window. When Sr. Gualberta came by, she yanked the curtain back into place and turned Sister Alberta toward the parlor door, insisting that she didn’t need to know what was going on in the world.

Oh, but Sister Alberta looked her straight in the eye and inquired, “Didn’t you know, Sister, we’re in America? And it’s a free country.”

Rhetorical questions, I learned that night, persuade without alienation. That was a good lesson to keep in mind when my sister Eleanor and I returned from the Sorbonne with a bit of Europe in our luggage and hearts and minds, Vatican II in our bloodstream, and a Bishop in the Diocese who was not keen on change.

Imagine! We had gone to the Sorbonne – when getting a doctorate cost \$25 a year – and returned with more than anyone could pay for.

Inspired by the wind and fire of the new Pentecost, we were not about to shut the Church windows opened by good Pope John XXIII.

When Mother Mary Borgia, who had reluctantly given us permission to wear secular clothes in the face of hostility toward religious in France, convened the extraordinary Chapter after Vatican II, we could not imagine how the extraordinary would descend upon us on the wings of a daring dove.

I did not think that Eleanor would become a councilor and I would become Reverend Mother, and then President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious..

Who would have dared to dream I would receive invitations from President Jimmy Carter to visit the Vatican on Air Force I? Twice! With people like Walter Mondale, and the writer Sister Joan Chittister, I would mingle with the crowds at the installation of Popes John Paul I and John Paul II.

All our sisters were already learning a new vocabulary in small groups and large groups and Inter-American Conferences. Subsidiarity and solidarity and consensus and preferential option for the poor and justice as a constitutive element of the preaching of the Gospels jumped out of our mouths into the life of our communities.

Through that extraordinary chapter we returned to our roots and remembered stories heard from the oldest, wisest women we called “Sister.” They were stories about Le Puy and Lyons, Springfield and Holyoke, and about Sisters in soup lines and hand-in-hand in line, bringing food from convent kitchens to hungry dear neighbors, and Sacred Heart badges and compassion to poor alcoholics on the street.

Our old stories mingled with Gospel stories and the signs of our times. Sisters became midwives birthing new stories of justice and peace in our schools and at the Elms, in parishes and houses of prayer and hospital chaplaincies, in diocesan offices and prisons, in home care and health care, and care for the unborn and unwanted. We began to protest on behalf of the farmworkers and the Vietnamese and women and children.

Our mission spread to Africa even as the size of our community was shrinking. Some Sisters left but continued to work with us, mingling our charism into their newfound lives as wives and mothers and professional women.

Our newly liberated sense of ourselves gave us a public voice on behalf of others as well as ourselves in the world and the Church.

Shortly after the Fall River Province of the Le Puy Sisters of Saint Joseph merged with us, we began to realize how painfully unjust was the Church system that gave us pennies for our stipend and our sustenance.

It wasn't all that long ago, that I put on my new pink dress, with the pretty lace collar that made me remember Le Puy, and addressed our entire congregation.

I told them the unpretty truth that once again the Bishop of Springfield had denied us a raise and that, with increasing responsibility for the health care of our oldest sisters, we had to take seriously the consequences of more than 300 of us working in our home diocese for an unjust wage.

Would my sisters stand with me, I asked, if I stood up to the Bishop to say his answer was unacceptable and we were wondering if we needed to find work elsewhere?

One by one, Sisters stood until everyone in our multi-purpose room was standing for one purpose. I can still see the oldest, in all her fragility, edging out of her wheelchair and the Sister to either side of her holding on for dear life.

I could feel the Spirit blowing through us like ribbons of electricity that day.

After the meeting, I went to Mass, where the Gospel story about the mother whom Jesus refused when she asked for help for her daughter mingled with our family predicament. Jesus said he was sent for the children of His house. She countered, "Don't even the dogs get the scraps that fall from the Master's table?"

After Mass I immediately phoned the Bishop to again raise the question of an increase in our salaries. This time, like that Syro-Phoenician mother, I got Yes for an answer.

The news galloped through the community and I felt in my bones Jesus saying to me, as he said to that mother, "You can go home happy."

It's overwhelming sometimes, but I've learned how much happens between our roots and the signs of our times, between the newspaper and the Gospel. We now know the truth of "The Church in the Modern World."

We know that "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well."

Now that's the world and the Church turning somersaults and it's all upside down with love.

Extraordinary!

She exits, passing Sister Patty McDonnell and extends the book. Sister Patty shakes her head no and holds up a slightly larger white book.. They smile and embrace with their right arms briefly.

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ACT 5

Sister Patty places the book on the table and sits.

She speaks.

It is 2024 and I am Sister Patricia McDonnell — Patty— the vice president of our congregation, one member of a four-Sister leadership team elected in 2022.

She touches the white book.

This is the Constitution of our Community. It has been rewritten for these times and was approved in 1986, during the presidency of Sister Kathleen Keating.

She rests her hand on the book and is quiet for a moment, then resumes speaking.

I entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1967, expecting to teach, and I did: in North Adams, in Northampton, and in Holyoke where I also served as principal.

But I am one example of the ways in which our ministries became more personal and more diverse as some Sisters left teaching and became pastoral ministers, home health workers, and so forth.

Some of these job changes were precipitated by schools closing; in other cases, Sisters simply felt called to different positions.

For instance, I chose to work in our Peace and Justice Center; and then in several capacities with various populations, often under the auspices of Open Pantry Community Services.

During this period, Sister Kathleen challenged us to make a stranger a neighbor and, while continuing our full-time ministries, we sought to do so. For example, Sisters began to volunteer in soup kitchens and with battered women. We joined the farmworkers' struggle for better wages and decent working conditions by boycotting grapes and joining picket lines.

Such direct contact with the stranger changed our view of mission and ministry.

I studied for a master's in social work and returned to Open Pantry, which was then providing walk-in services to individuals experiencing homelessness, mental health issues, and addiction. As Program Director, I enjoyed working with staff to respond to any need that came our way.

My world grew as my reflection and action enveloped people of all ages, classes, races, the rich, poor, and everyone in between.

Then I was elected to the Sisters of St. Joseph leadership team and served for six years. In 1999, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Vermont asked if their Congregation might rejoin ours. In 2001 this became a reality.

The Sisters of St. Joseph in the Fall River Diocese, with links to Le Puy, had asked to merge with us in 1971.

That merger in 1974 made history as the first between women's communities to secure Vatican approval. Our Sisters Estelle Santarpia and Mary Dooley paved the way. The roads and regions we were then traveling ran east toward Fall River, north to Rutland, Vermont, and as far away as Africa and Jamaica. By now this "merging" had become emblematic of the life of religious women across the world. Were we not sisters, after all?

After that first term in leadership, I worked for Community and Support Options, as case manager with individuals who experienced mental illness.

I was assigned my first job and pursued the others and loved every one I had.

While our Community was growing in new ways, and exploring possibilities, our aging and infirm population was increasing and the time came to consider selling Mont Marie, our largest property.

After lengthy, inclusive discernment and dialogue, we eventually did sell. The site is now home to a privately owned health care facility, as well as low-income apartments where more than 30 of us live, most in retirement, and in a community that is continually recreating itself.

Much has changed but wherever you may find us, our mission "that all may be one" and that we "make the stranger the neighbor" has been constant since our founding in 1650. One aspect of responding to the needs of the dear neighbor was our Chapter's institution in 2005 of the Community of St. Joseph, which includes our associates, agrégées and Partners in Mission.

In studying our history, we discovered that our first members included women who were vowed and women who were not. So this inclusive structure made sense.

In 1976, associates became the first group to share our charism, our inclination toward reconciliation and our mission.

Later, from among the associates came individuals who wanted to express their connection with the whole Community in a deeper way. They were called agrégées as lay members had been in LePuy.

We also began to see with new eyes our lay employees as Partners in Mission. How many now do work once done by perpetually vowed Sisters and do so at our side and in our spirit?

Countless are those who serve on our behalf.

We Sisters of St. Joseph came here and crossed the continent from the 19th into the 20th centuries to respond to the needs of the times. We reached out to other immigrants from Europe and our congregation, small in the beginning, grew rapidly.

It was a period in the United States when the need was great and private Church schools were prized.

In time, that need lessened, others have developed—and we continue to respond.

Our Sisters in full-time active ministry are few now. Still we find ways to reach out to the dear neighbor, ways that are indirect and sometimes invisible—with prayer, presence,

financial support of fundraising activities for the common good, letters to politicians in support of, or opposition to, legislation concerning current issues. Some schools we founded remain, largely staffed by lay teachers and administrators, and carry on in the tradition of our first Sisters.

I entered the community with 24 women; the last large group to enter. After us, for a decade or so, entrants came in groups of six or fewer and that number gradually dwindled to one or two at a time.

We were the last group trained in the “old order.” As postulants, we received “the habit” when the rest of the Community was changing into skirts and blouses, wearing short veils, and letting their hair grow.

We entered on the cusp of change, so it was easier for us to adapt to changes.

Also, seeing the number of vowed Sisters shrink has been easier, perhaps, because, for at least the past 20 years, we have wrestled openly with the realistic projections,

Still, living the reality is difficult. Who among us wants to own the fragility that comes with aging?

We are not alone in facing the challenges of these times. We are but one Congregation in the U.S. Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph that extends from Maine to Hawaii and beyond, and whose members serve across the face of the Earth.

We belong also to our country’s Leadership Conference of Women Religious and to the International Union of Women’s Congregations in Rome.

You may recall that several years ago, along with the majority of women religious worldwide, we embraced Vatican II’s call to return to our roots and to integrate justice issues with spirituality.

When a more conservative Pope was elected, however, some Vatican officials saw an opportunity to question women religious on how we were living our vowed commitment. A very specific questionnaire sent to every religious congregation asked about day-to-day activities from a very “rule-oriented” perspective.

As members of LCWR, we joined with most other congregations in considering whether these “black and white” questions spoke to the lived reality of religious life today. To answer them was impossible for women who embraced a model of “unity in diversity” rather than “unity in uniformity.”

After discussion and much prayer, my Community chose to join others in respectfully offering our Constitution as a means of evaluating our vowed commitment, rather than answer questions posed by the Vatican.

National and local news outlets sensationalized this entire process by presenting it as Vatican officials attempting to reprimand women religious.

People from across the United States wrote letters to the editor in support of Sisters. We felt a groundswell of support.

Eventually, the controversy subsided and we continue to live our lives with fidelity to the Gospel and our Constitution.

Meanwhile, the role of all women in society and in the Church – somewhat! — has evolved to a point where they can and do minister to their “dear neighbor” without any formal connection to a religious congregation.

I am at peace with the changes.

We have never existed just to keep our Congregation going. I believe our founders and early leaders would agree. They focused on meeting the unmet needs of the dear neighbor.

As needs have changed, and will change, we will continue to respond.

As I said earlier, I was elected to leadership for the second time in 2022. I don’t know if I aspired to it, but I felt called to it because others affirmed my ability to do it again.

The focus of leadership has shifted over the years. Now, we spend much of our time with our elderly and frail Sisters as they make choices for their lives—and draw closer to eternal life.

I hope and believe that Sister Betsy Sullivan, our president, and team members Sisters Eileen Sullivan, Denise Granger and I are continuing the legacy of the women you’ve “met” today.

I feel certain that our current members honor our Congregation’s long history and commitments to one another and beyond.

I would like you in the audience to know that, as we are aging, and our roles changing, we are still involved in supporting our dear neighbor—and we do mean you—however we can.

We remain open to the Will of God for us now and in the future. In that we find uncommon peace.

She exits, taking the Constitution with her.

The narrator enters and goes to the front of the stage, setting the microphone before him and raising it.

He speaks.

I would like to introduce the current leadership team; Sister Elizabeth Sullivan, President; Sister Patricia McDonnell—the real Sister Patty—Vice President; and Sisters Eileen Sullivan and Denise Granger.

I invite all the Sisters of St. Joseph here to stand or otherwise make their presence known.

And the Associates and Acregees.

And Partners in Mission.

(Applause)

He lowers the mic and steps back.

Jane takes his place and speaks:

“We have shared some of our history with you. You have seen how we began and how we have come to this time and place.

Here, now, you see our today and a glimpse of our tomorrow.” (She gestures)

This is the Community of St. Joseph.

(Applause)

She continues.

If any of you have had your life touched by any or all of us, know that we have been touched by you as well.

You are the dear neighbor And we love you.”

The cast and director come out and join the narrator and Sister Jane and all take their bows.

(Applause)

House lights up.

The End.